

# Parables

The parables are like bright beams of light.

They are stories told by Jesus which hold eternal truth.

In their light we see that God has a claim on our lives, and that we are asked to make a willing response.

They're as simple as that!

There are three things about Parables that are important to remember:

1. **they're there to be read – listened to – so read them!**
2. **try and discover the original situation, i.e. the situation in which Jesus first told the parable; and the teaching which he had in mind for us.**
3. **see them as a description of our ordinary human lives and our own situations.**

So let's look at a parable in this light and discover what treasure it holds for us.

## Luke 15 11-32

A man had two sons. One day the younger of the two demanded the share of his father's property which would belong to him when his father died. His father gave it to him, and after a few days the boy left home on a long journey.

Here he wasted the money and lived a wild life. When the money was all spent, there was a famine, and he began to be in serious need. He found some work in looking after the pigs of a farmer in that district. But there was nothing which he could eat.

At last he was so hungry and so hopeless that he started to consider who he was and what sort of person he had become. He saw that he was poorer than the poorest of his father's servants. Then he decided to return home. He planned to admit that he had done wrong and to ask his father to employ him as a servant, since he could not expect to be treated as a son any longer.

So he made the long journey home. But before he could reach the house, his father saw him. He saw the boy's misery, and ran down the road and welcomed him with affection. The boy began to speak of the wrong that he had done, but before he could ask to be employed as a servant, his father called for a robe of honour and put it on him. Then he gave him a ring and sandals to show that he was fully accepted as his son. And a feast was prepared so that everyone could share in his father's joy.

The other son had been working on the farm. As he returned to the house he heard the singing and the hand-clapping, and asked what had happened. His father came out and begged him to join in the feast. But he said, "I have worked for you for years, yet you never made a feast for me. Now you welcome this son of yours who has wasted your money." Then his father said gently, "My boy, of course we must welcome him home. He is not only 'my son' as you call him; he is your brother. Come inside and share my joy. The one that was lost has now been found."

## The name of this parable?

This parable was called the parable of the Prodigal Son by those who gave us the Authorised Version of the Bible. **Its not the best title for the parable because it draws our attention only to one person in the story.** We have seen that Jesus was directing the attention of his hearers to the father and the older brother as well as to the younger son. It is often referred to nowadays as the **Prodigal Father!** – but the title of the story should perhaps be **A father and his sons.**

**Prodigal = recklessly wasteful or extravagant**

## The original situation

Luke put this story alongside the stories of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin, and it is likely that Jesus told all three for the same reasons.

We saw that he told those parables as a reply to the scribes and Pharisees.

They had become troubled because Jesus was associating with "sinners".

His behaviour seemed to them to be wicked, and they criticized him severely for it.

By means of these parables he explained why he welcomed such people. He called on the scribes and Pharisees also to share in God's love and His care for sinners and the despised.

So the first time that Jesus told this parable, He told it to His enemies.

It seems that he was asking them to compare:

**a. the attitude of the father towards the boy, and**

**b. the attitude of the elder brother who refused to give the boy a welcome. Jesus was saying:**  
*Will you have the outlook of the elder brother or the attitude of the father towards 'sinners'? Are you going to stand apart from people, or will you share in God's love towards them? If you share in God's love, you will also share in His joy when they return to fellowship with Him.*

The parable wasn't only a rebuke to his enemies. It was also an appeal, spoken in love.

Jesus longed that they should *change their ways*.

This is shown by the gentle way in which the father spoke to the elder brother, "My boy ...." (v. 31).

## Application

The themes running through this parable:

**1. God and His love.**

**2. People without Love.**

**3. People without God.**

### I. God and His love.

The father in the story showed his love for the boy in many ways: by giving him freedom to leave home although he knew the boy might misuse that freedom, by running to welcome the boy back in spite of his behaviour, by his joy when the boy returned. In noticing this and also the teaching given by Jesus at other times we learn what God's love for mankind is like.

- **He loves us all the time. He loves us even while we are doing wrong. He hates our sinfulness but never stops loving us ourselves. We do not cease to be His sons even when we are bad sons.**
- **He offers to rescue us and He offers forgiveness all the time. (But we cannot receive it until we are sorry for wrong-doing and sincerely intend to change our ways.)**
- **He does not wait for us to earn His love or forgiveness. He offers them freely.**

We can see this clearly if we compare the parable with a Buddhist story about a lost son. In the Buddhist story the father hides from the son when he returns, and orders his servants to test the boy in different ways to see if he has fully repented of wasting his money. When the boy has passed these tests, the father takes him back. This story shows the way that people usually expect God to behave. So people try to earn God's love by being good or by making sacrifices. But God's love cannot be earned: it can only be received thankfully and humbly.

## 2. People without Love.

The attitude of the elder brother reminds us that it is possible to be *religious* without being loving. So the parable is a warning.

We are without love when:

- We grow so accustomed to God and his love for us that we are no longer grateful to Him;
- We think that God loves us because we are good sons and forget that he loves us simply because we are His sons;
- We judge others and fail to care for them in their troubles and in their sins;
- We forget that if God is our Father then all his sons are our brothers.

If we are without love in these ways, then we are missing the full life that God meant us to live. We are missing it just as the elder brother cut himself off from the feast. (It is usual to say that the younger son was "lost", and so he was. But the elder brother was "lost" too. He cut himself off from the full life of sharing in the joys and the troubles. of the rest of his family. He failed to "rejoice with those who rejoice" or to "weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12.15).)

## 3. People without God.

From studying the "lost son" in the parable, we learn much about human beings as they try to live without God.

# Our own situation

I. The boy who was lost reminds us of all human sin and suffering – it reminds us of some ways in which mankind sins and suffers:

### a. the desire to be free from responsibility.

When the boy demanded his money, he was refusing his duties and responsibilities and discipline at home. So he went away and did what he wanted.

We want to be free from the responsibilities God has given us. People have children but expect the State to teach them good manners. People live in a town but expect other people to make it a good town. People want to be free, but forget that they must give an account to God of how the freedom is used.

### b. self-centredness.

The boy said to his father, *Give me* (v. 12). So people say, *Let the world give me what I want; let other people give me what I think I deserve.* Newspapers and advertisements encourage their readers to say this more and more.

### c. disappointment.

The things which the boy took didn't last for long. They couldn't satisfy him.

This disappointment comes to anyone who expects that things can themselves bring him peace and joy. An American wrote, *We Americans have now got everything. Why then are we not satisfied?*

When we read about this boy, we are not reading about a great sinner, but about ordinary people. Many of us will also find ourselves saying, "I am reading about myself."

2. The way in which the boy was rescued may remind us of some ways in which mankind can be rescued.

a. He began to know himself. ("He came to himself" v. 17.) He saw what sort of person he was becoming. (Feeding pigs was the work given to those who could not do any other work.) He discovered that his demand of *give me* did not bring the best kind of life. We begin to return to fellowship with God when he sees what sort of person he is becoming. One person's prayer was, *O God, I know what I have and what I do. But I don't know what I am.*

b. He knew his need. He was hungry and ashamed. So the one thing that is necessary before God can take a person back into fellowship with himself is that the person should know their need. The person who thinks they can live in their own strength cannot be helped.

c. He remembered his home and wanted to return (v. 18). It is not enough for someone to be in need: that person must know also where their home is. We must be "home-sick". One overseas student in London says that the longing to return home is the thing that helps her to live a good life in London. God himself is the Father and the Home of everyone. ("Dwell in me" John 15. 4.)

d. He returned to his father in faith. He could not be sure if his father would accept him. (*Treat me as one of your hired servants* v. 19.) But he was welcomed with joy. When someone returns to God, they do so in "faith", i.e. they do so because they rely on God's generosity and forgiveness. We don't return because of what we ourselves have done.

**Parable, not allegory\*.**

**This is a parable, and has one chief message which we find by reading the whole story.**

**If it had been an allegory, we should have taken a lesson from each part of the story.**

We might have said, "The father in the story is God." But we cannot say that. Although the father loved the son, he did not make a journey to find him.

God does not wait for sinners to return, He goes out to find them.

In the same way we cannot say that when Jesus spoke about the robe and ring and sandals in v. 22, He was thinking of the Bible and Baptism and Holy Communion.

Some people have made the story into an allegory and have interpreted these words in this way. But these things are in the story because the story would not be complete without them: they are there to show that the son was given back his old position in the home.

a couple of notes about the parable:

**To feed swine** (v. 15).

This parable was told to Jews, and among the Jews pigs were considered *unclean* animals.

Anyone who fed pigs was breaking the rules of his religion, i.e. he was a sinner.

**All that is mine is yours** (v. 31) i.e. you have nothing to boast about.

You have it because I give it to you and because you are my son.

- **Allegory: an allegory is a play or a poem in which the apparent meaning of the characters and events is used to symbolise a moral or spiritual meaning**

## Some things for you to do at home:

1. For each of the following words used in this chapter, give another which has the opposite meaning.

a. responsible	
b. self-centred	
c. disappointed	

2. The boy in the parable "returned to his father in faith". What does "faith" mean in this sentence?

3.

a. For what reasons did the younger son decide to go home?

b. In what ways are the words spoken by him in Luke 15 v21 different from his words in verses 18 and 19?

4. **Nothing to write here! Just think about this - Are the following true or untrue? Why?**

- a. God waits for us to earn His forgiveness.
- b. God never stops offering to pardon us.
- c. God continues to care for us even when we are committing sin.
- d. We cannot earn God's love.
- e. Its easy for God to forgive us.

5. **The younger brother was lost. Was the elder brother also lost? (If so – how?)**